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MARIAN DOGMAS WITHIN VATICAN II'S HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS

At the sixth international mariological congress, held in Zagreb during August of 1971, Reverend Eric Mascall, the very reputable Anglican theologian, began his presentation with the following statement: "From a theological and from an ecumenical standpoint, one of the most significant statements made by the Second Vatican Council is contained in the brief sentence in chapter two of the Decree on Ecumenism which says that 'there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths of Catholic doctrine, since they have different connections with the foundation of the Christian faith' "¹ In the course of this paper, I shall again be referring to his paper which considers the place of mariology in Christian theology and provides an excellent background for my topic. I propose to explore the theological and ecumenical significance of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths' with regard to the four Marian dogmas: Mary's motherhood of God; her perpetual virginity; the immaculate conception; and her glorious assumption.

Our principal task is to present these Marian dogmas within the perspective of their role in relation to the central truths of our Christian faith and the divine economy of salvation. I submit that the 'hierarchy of truths' teaching from the Decree on Ecumenism calls for a contemporary contemplation of Mary in close connection with the triune God revealed in the Incarnate Word, our Redeemer, and also in intimate relationship with the mystery of the Church, the members of His redeemed Body of which she is a part. According to this approach, the dogmas of

¹ E. L. Mascall, *The Place of Mariology in Christian Theology: An Anglican Approach*, in *De Cultu Mariano Saeculis VI-XI, Acta Congressus Mariologici-Mariani Internationalis in Croatia Anno 1971 Celebrati*, Vol. 2, *Considerationes Generales* (Rome, 1972) 125.

her divine maternity and perpetual virginity are given a Christocentric focus in the truths of revelation, and the dogmas of her immaculate conception and assumption take on more of an ecclesiotypical meaning in the economy of salvation. Let me insert immediately that this is said to emphasize the place of the Marian dogmas within the context of the 'hierarchy' and not to exclude the Christocentric and ecclesiotypical character of *all* the truths revealed about her unique role in salvation history. As Otto Semmelroth observes: "There can be no conflict between seeing Mary as the archetype of the Church and seeing her in relation to Christ. She is the archetype of the Church only because her connection with Christ as His mother forms the basis for the share which the Church as Christ's bride has in His work. Conversely, a Christocentric view of Mary is incompatible with any individualist conception of Christ and His work; it necessarily considers Christ together with that mysterious body which He has acquired through His redemption and which is His Church."²

It seems to me that this is supported by the very title of chapter VIII in *Lumen Gentium*: "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and the Church."³ We must come to contemplate Mary in her twofold relationship to the redeeming God and to redeemed humanity. This is the central consideration of our paper which consists of three sections; 1) an interpretation of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths'; 2) an application of its significance for the Christocentric and ecclesiotypical character of the four Marian dogmas; and 3) its ecumenical implications particularly pertaining to the problem about the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption as requisite for a unity of faith in the one Church of Jesus Christ.

² O. Semmelroth, *Constitution on the Church, Chapter 8, in Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., 7 (New York, 1968) 286.

³ *De Beata Maria Virgine Deipara in mysterio Christi et Ecclesiae*.

Before embarking upon the first section, please permit me a few more introductory remarks. One is that this paper, a relatively brief presentation of several questions and problems, should be understood as primarily tentative, exploratory and so designed to simulate discussion. The very meaning of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths' is still far from being precisely determined, although the interpretation that I shall propose is mainly a reflection upon comments that are common to other theologians. Likewise, the second section on the connections of the Marian dogmas with the "foundation of the Christian faith" is intended to offer suggestions for further development. At the same time it should help provide criteria to explore the ecumenical possibilities in the final section of the paper.

In this context our Mariological Society is especially fortunate to have Father Avery Dulles as Discussion Leader for my paper. A little more than a year ago, you will recall, he made the proposal that the Church lift the anathemas attached to the Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption.⁴ Father Dulles did this on December 6, 1974 at an academic convocation in Xavier University, Cincinnati, honoring the retired Episcopalian bishop of Southern Ohio, Bishop Hobson. In his address delivered on that occasion, he appeals to Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths' as one of the reasons why such an important step is possible. You will also recall that out of this proposal much discussion arose. Unfortunately, at least in some places, such discussion generated more heat than light. The fact is, however, that Father Dulles' proposal deserves serious consideration. At our last annual meeting in Atlanta, early January of 1975, there was much genuine interest among the members of our Society to investigate its meaning and implications further. In his presidential address, Father George Kirwin spoke of it in terms of a challenge to the Marian theologian: "The question of Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assump-

⁴ A. Dulles, *A Proposal to Lift Anathemas*, in *Origins: N. C. documentary service* (Dec. 26, 1974) 4, no. 27.

tion reaches to the core of the ever-present problematic of the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work in this present world."⁵ Obviously, at last year's convention there was time for only the briefest of discussions about Father Dulles' proposal, although Father Eamon Carroll was able to enlighten us considerably by his own positive evaluation in reply to questions. It is my prayerful hope that our theological investigation today will serve to explore further its ecumenical implications.

TOWARD AN INTERPRETATION OF
VATICAN II'S 'HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS'

The context of Vatican II's conciliar teaching on the 'hierarchy of truths' is chapter two of the Decree on Ecumenism which deals with the practice of ecumenism. After stating the need to express Catholic doctrine integrally and warning against a false irenicism opposed to the authentic spirit of ecumenism, the council points out the importance of explaining our faith in a manner that is intelligible to our separated brethren and elaborates upon this by adding:

...in ecumenical dialogue, Catholic theologians, standing fast by the teaching of the Church yet searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries, should do so with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. *When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. (Italics mine).* Thus the way will be opened whereby this kind of "fraternal rivalry" will incite all to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ.⁶

⁵ G. Kirwin, *Presidential Address*, in *Marian Studies* 26 (1975) 18.

⁶ "...in dialogo oecumenico theologi catholici, doctrinae Ecclesiae inhaerentes, una cum fratribus seiunctis investigationem peragentes de divinis mysteriis, cum veritatis amore, caritate et humilitate progredi debent. *In comparandis doctrinis meminere existere ordinem seu "hierarchiam" veritatum doctrinae catholicae, cum diversus sit earum nexus cum funda-*

Without saying so explicitly, the conciliar fathers identify the "foundation of the Christian faith" in the opening words of the very next paragraph in the decree: "Before the whole world let all Christians confess their faith in God, one and three, in the incarnate Son of God, our Redeemer and Lord."⁷ The mysteries that form the foundation of our faith, therefore, are the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption; all the other truths of Catholic Doctrine are hierarchically ordered in accord with their relation to them.

The statement of the council's teaching in the matter is simple and clear, but difficulties arise when we begin to pose such questions as: just what does the term "foundation" mean in this context? are the other truths of Catholic doctrine to be considered as flowing logically from this foundation?; is it primarily an order or "hierarchy" of importance with regard to beliefs necessary for salvation?; does the hierarchy vary with the changes of history? is the "foundation" alone sufficient for organic unity in the one Church of Christ? Despite the rather enthusiastic response given to the "hierarchy of truths" doctrine shortly after its promulgation in the Decree on Ecumenism (Nov. 21, 1964), remarkably little direct commentary has been written about its proper interpretation. O. Cullmann said in an article that appeared in April, 1965: "A point which . . . seems the most important in the whole scheme for the future of our dialogue . . . I consider this passage the most revolutionary to be found . . . in any of the schemas of the present Council."⁸ In 1966 a German Catholic theologian, H. Mühlen

mento fidei Christianae. Sic via sternetur qua per fraternam hanc aemulationem omnes incitentur ad profundiorum cognitionem et clariorem manifestationem investigabilium divitiarum Christi." *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 11. trans. from *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, A. Flannery, ed. (Northport, N.Y., 1975) 462.

⁷ "Coram omnibus gentibus Christiani universi fidem in Deum unum et trinum, in filium Dei incarnatum, Redemptorem et Dominum nostrum confiteantur . . ." *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 12. trans., *loc. cit.*

⁸ O. Cullmann, *Comments on the Decree on Ecumenism*, in *The Ecumenical Review* 15 (April, 1965) 94.

wrote an article on its significance for the ecumenical dialogue and used the Marian dogmas as an example.⁹ In 1968 an entire book was written on the subject by a Protestant, Ulrich Valeske, who gave some consideration to the controversial dogmas.¹⁰ My own interpretation of what "hierarchy of truths" does and does not mean is based principally upon Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio's speech in first introducing the idea at the council, upon Johannes Feiner's commentary on the decree, and on Father Yves Congar's more recent reflections. These will be documented in their proper places along with such other theologians as K. Rahner and E. Schillebeeckx whose writings on related questions throw considerable light on this problem. As indicated at the outset of the paper, I shall also be drawing upon Eric Mascall's thoughts.

On November 25, 1963, Archbishop Pangrazio of Gorizia, Italy, in discussing the schema on ecumenism first introduced the notion of an order in professed truths with a view toward clarifying the unity already existing among the Christians of different churches. After examining his remarks along with Feiner's commentary on the decree, we can draw some clear conclusions about the "hierarchy of truths."¹¹ First of all, it is a "hierarchy" of importance with the mysteries that concern our final goal being in the place of first or central importance. And so we might add to the primary or central mysteries already indicated in the Decree on Ecumenism—namely, the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption—God's merciful love toward sinful humanity, eternal life in glory, etc. The latter, however, would in effect be really explicitations of the

⁹ H. Mühlen, *Die lehre des Vaticanum II über die 'hierarchia veritatum' und ihre Bedeutung für den oekumenischen Dialog*, in *Theologie und Glaube* 56 (1966) 303-335.

¹⁰ U. Valeske, *Hierarchia Veritatum: Theologischgeschichtliche Hintergründe und mögliche Konsequenzen eines Hinweises im Ökumenismusdekret des II. Vatikanischen Konzils zum zwischenkirchlichen Gespräch*, (Munich, 1968).

¹¹ J. Feiner, *Decree on Ecumenism*, in Vorgrimler, *op. cit.*, 2, 118-123.

mystery of Redemption. The other truths of our faith are on the level of means toward salvation, such as the seven sacraments, the hierarchical structure of the church, the apostolic succession, etc. Such secondary or peripheral truths in the order or "hierarchy" are not to be considered as unimportant or any less true and revealed. Archbishop Pangrazio remarked: "Although all the truths revealed by divine faith are to be believed with the same divine faith and all those elements which make up the church must be kept with equal fidelity, not all of them are of equal importance."¹² The criterion for the ranking, therefore, is not in the theological note attached to the truth or the formal motive of divine Catholic faith required by a dogma, but in its closeness to the mystery of Christ which of course includes the mystery of the redeeming triune God. According to this norm, therefore, a revealed truth that has not been defined may be of higher status or value than one that is *de fide definita*. What touches the very core of our Christian faith as to its contents is the heart of the matter in the "hierarchy of truths."

We might note here that two major modes of speaking figuratively about the "hierarchy of truths" have emerged. One is linear which refers to primary and secondary truths in the order. The other is circular describing the truths in the "hierarchy" as central and peripheral in accord with the image of a series of concentric circles. While both are acceptable, the latter seems to have the advantage of conveying the idea of a more dynamic interconnection and interdependence among the truths of our faith. And so we shall speak of the primary truths as the *central* mysteries, and of truths in the second or third rank as *peripheral*. What is essential to our interpretation is that we always understand the doctrinal content of the peripheral truths in relation to the central mysteries of Jesus Christ and the redeeming triune God revealed in Him. At the same time, the peripheral truths are important as revealed mysteries or dogmas intimately

¹² Text in D. O'Hanlon *et al.* (eds.), *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, N.J., 1964) 192.

connected with the triune God's loving plan for our salvation in Christ.

These peripheral truths of our faith have a double function in our Christian lives of contemplation and action: they throw greater light upon the meaning of the central mysteries of our faith and also help show their practical application to our daily existence as believers in the world. Being truths about the means toward our salvation, such as the sacraments, devotion to Mary and all the saints, etc. they often make more specific and concrete for us the depths of the central mysteries. Reciprocally, these truths at the center of our faith give direction to those on the periphery, preventing them from losing their true character as media of more profound realities in divine revelation.

In what sense can it be said that the peripheral truths in the "hierarchy" are derived from the central mysteries of our faith? Eric Mascall maintains that the latter are necessary conditions of the former which could not even exist without them.¹³ For example, without belief in the Incarnation, the truth about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist would be meaningless or trivial. He sees this dependence as more than merely a logical relation between the central and peripheral truths. Truths of the same periphery are mutually related as well as to all the other mysteries in the universe of revelation. This brings us to the complex problem of how dogmas develop in the living Tradition of the Church, a problem that we can only touch upon lightly in this paper.

Indeed the problem of doctrinal development in the Church's Tradition is one of those theological problems that always merges with mystery. For just how the Spirit guides the Church of Christ in the authentic development of our faith is at the center of the ecclesiological mystery. With Catholic belief we accept the magisterium as a *norm* of judging what is and what is not genuine growth in accord with the revealing Word of

¹³ E. Mascall, *op. cit.*, 126.

God. It is, however, a *norm* and not the agent or efficient cause of dogmatic development which is the believing community as a whole under the impact of the Spirit. In principle there ought not to be a conflict between the infallible teaching authority of Christ's Church and the content of the revealed truth to which we give assent. Historically, particularly in the polemical period between Trent and Vatican II, too much attention has been paid to the formal motive of believing (*qua creditur*) and insufficient consideration given to the salvific meaning and spiritual value of the dogma (*quod creditur*). One of the theological contributions of Vatican II's "hierarchy of truths" teaching is to restore the balance by putting the peripheral mysteries in perspective through their connection with the central mysteries. It too, therefore, must merge with the ecclesiological mystery of our developing faith in the Church. And so we must briefly consider a viable theory of development in dogma which provides a plausible explanation of the way in which the peripheral truths of our faith are derived from the central mysteries.

Yves Congar emphasizes the patristic penchant for beholding all the truths of our faith as clustering around a central mystery:

The strength of the writings of the fathers . . . lies in their synthetic character. For instance, when they speak of the Eucharist, they never do so without mentioning the idea of Redemption, the mystical body, the church, our divinisation, indeed, some evocation of the holy Trinity. It seems that all is in all. The special genius of the fathers—and of the tradition—is that they always see the parts in their organic relationship to the center, which might be called the Christian mystery or the divinisation of man. Early Christian art drew from the same source of inspiration: in one way or another it always represented the mystery of our salvation.¹⁴

He immediately adds that "...even the more representative

¹⁴ Y. Congar, *On the "Hierarchia Veritatum,"* in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in honor of the Very Rev. G. V. Florovsky* (Rome, 1973) 411.

thinkers of thirteenth-century scholasticism were vividly aware of a centering of truths around several main articles, and thus of an organic structure both of faith and its confession, and of the revelation to which it corresponds."¹⁵

Congar investigates Thomas Aquinas as one of these representative thinkers and cites several references in his works which contain his distinction between the two categories within the truths of faith as primarily the object of revelation: those which are directly truths of faith by reason of their content (*directe, per se*); and those which are such indirectly through their connection with the former (*indirecte, in ordine ad alia*).¹⁶ Aquinas' criterion for the content of revealed truths in the first category, or those which are directly the object of revelation, is that they are the mysteries of man's salvation or the truths that are essential to his fulfillment in glory: "... illa per se pertinent ad fidem quorum visione in vita aeterna perfruemur, et per quae ducemur in vitam aeternam."¹⁷

With Congar we are looking at St. Thomas' thought here not to find an explanation of how dogmas develop, but for certain criteria of what is central in the "hierarchy of truths." Although the approach of a thirteenth-century theologian to the problem may appear to us as an artificial scholastic device and lacking in a sense of historicity, it still evidences in the best of our theological tradition an instinct to search for a *divine* logic in the truths of revelation. It is a tradition which helped pave the way for the teaching of Vatican I which mapped out the path of theological study and is itself pertinent to Vatican II's "hierarchy of truths": "Reason, indeed, enlightened by faith, when it seeks earnestly, piously, calmly, attains by a gift from God some understanding, and that very fruitful, of mys-

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Com. in Sent.* II, d. 12, q. 1, a. 2; III, d. 14, a. 1, qa 1 sol. et ad 2; qu 2 ad 3; *Q. disp. de Veritate*, q. 14, a. 8, ad obj.; *S.T.*, I-II, q. 106, a. 4 ad 2; *Com. in Epist. ad Titum*, c. 3, lect 4; *Compend. Theol.* I, 2 et 185.

¹⁷ *S.T.*, II-II, q. 1, a. 8 c.

teries; partly from the analogy of those things which it naturally knows, *partly from the relations the mysteries bear to one another and to the last end of man.*"¹⁸

While every theory of doctrinal development in the Church is *per se* provisional because the Spirit of God ever reveals Himself anew and, "his ways being inscrutable to us" (cf. *Rom.* 11: 33), we can never reduce Him to our rules of logic, still there are some contemporary theologians whose theories seem to avoid the rationalistic excesses of the past and to preserve the inherent tensions of the mystery in good dialectical balance. One such theologian of our times is E. Schillebeeckx who, particularly influenced by Newman's ideas, has overcome the logicism and historicism of older theories and formulates a theory that looks to neither theological deduction nor historical research *as such* for the principle of development.¹⁹ He states: "The Church wins its dogmas not by theological conclusions from Scripture, but by rediscovering its own living dogma in the Scripture."²⁰ The formal principle of development of faith must itself be supernatural and of faith; otherwise we are not talking about dogmatic development but a theological development.

Schillebeeckx's theory interprets the *sensus plenior* of Scripture as meaning essentially that the Spirit in the original inspiration put into the text of the Bible as a whole, an objective dynamism, a prophetic expandibility, which the same Spirit guides the Church as a whole to explicitate in the course of her salvation history. Thus he explains that the later Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption are formally revealed in the biblical theme of the "Daughter of Sion"

¹⁸ Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Filius*, April 24, 1870, chap. 4. trans in *The teaching of the Church*, K. Rahner (ed.), (Staten Island, N.Y., 1967) 36. Italics in the text are mine.

¹⁹ E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, 1 (New York, 1967) 57-83.

²⁰ E. Schillebeeckx, *Exegesis, Dogmatics and the Development of Dogma, Dogmatic vs. Biblical Theology*, H. Vorgrimler (ed.), (Baltimore, 1964), 143.

and not just virtually revealed. The Church came to an explicit consciousness of such dogmas only gradually and in light of the fulfillment of this theme in herself as the New Israel. Most especially she has come to see its realization in her most fully redeemed member, Mary, the New Eve, mother and archetype of the Church.

Another theologian of our times whose theory of development has also wedded well theology and economy, ontological speculation and historical facticity, is K. Rahner. We shall discuss its application to the Marian dogmas in the next section of our paper.

With a view toward developing them further in their application to the Marian dogmas, we may list the principal points in our interpretation of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths' as: 1) the "foundation of the Christian faith" is the central mystery of the triune God revealed in the incarnate Word, our Redeemer; 2) these revealed truths or articles of faith are on the level of the goal of our salvation in Christ, those we hope to see in glory; 3) the peripheral truths are no less true or revealed; 4) such revealed truths are on the level of the means toward our perfect salvation in eternal life; 5) they vary in this 'hierarchy' of importance, not by reason of theological notes as defined dogmas, etc., but through the closeness of their connection with the "foundation of the Christian faith"; 6) their main value is in illuminating the central mystery of Christianity as well as being transparent to its depth in daily life; 7) these peripheral truths are dependent upon and derived from the central mystery through a development in the Church's living Tradition of faith, worship, mission etc. which transcends human laws of logic without rejecting the contribution of theological and historical research. This summary replies to most but not all the questions posed at the beginning of this section. For we must first apply the "hierarchy of truths" teaching to the Marian dogmas before making any response to the ecumenical inquiry about their necessity for an organic unity of faith in one Church.

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE MARIAN DOGMAS

For the special purposes of this paper, it will not be necessary to dwell at length upon the Christocentric dimension of the divine maternity. We shall examine this dogma as the revealed truth about Mary that is closest to the mystery of Christ, the foundation of our faith, primarity in order to establish the connection between the other Marian dogmas and the central Christian mystery. Mary's unique relationship to Christ as truly His mother is the basis of her being archetype of His Body, the Church.

St. Thomas' Christological interpretation of the "Theotokos" summed up the Christian Tradition established at the Council of Ephesus (431) which defined Mary's motherhood of God as a dogma of our faith. He clearly affirms the intimate connection between her divine maternity and the mystery of the Incarnation: "...humanitas Christi et maternitas Virginis adeo sibi connexa sunt, ut qui circa unum erraverit, oporteat etiam circa aliud errare."²¹ In several other places, the Common Doctor teaches the same basic truth of the necessity to accept the mystery of the "Theotokos" to avoid any subordinationist misinterpretation of the Incarnation.²² But nowhere does he state his case more clearly about the intimate connection between the two dogmas than in the *Summa Theologiae* where the realism of the Marian mystery preserves and illuminates that of the Christological: "Cum igitur in ipso principio conceptionis fuerit humana natura assumpta a divina persona . . . consequens est quod vere posset dici Deum esse conceptum et natum de Virgine. Ex hoc autem dicitur aliqua mulier alicuius mater, quod eum concepit et genuit. Unde consequens est quod Beata Virgo vere dicatur mater Dei."²³ To call her God's own mother

²¹ *Com. in Sent.*, III, d. 4, q. 2., a. 2.

²² Cf. *Compend. Theolog.*, c. 222; *Summa Contr. Gent.*, IV, 34, 45; *Com. in Matt.*, c. 1; *Com. in Epist. ad Gal.*, c. 4, lect. 2.

²³ *S. T.*, III, q. 35, a. 4 c.

in a proper (*vere*) sense is indispensably associated with calling Him the Word incarnate, the humanity of God's own Son in person. Thus, for St. Thomas, Chalcedonian Christology could be preserved and developed only in conjunction with Mary's motherhood of God.

This fundamental truth immediately relates the Marian dogma of the virginal conception of Christ to the central mystery of our faith. Its Christocentric character stems from the fact that Mary's conceiving Christ without marital intercourse is a fitting witness to the divine transcendence of her child who has no human father since God alone is His Father.²⁴ Obviously such an argument of convenience in no way bespeaks a negative attitude toward human sexual experience in marriage. Other theological reasons of fittingness have been traditionally given for the dogma of Mary's virginity. These are ecclesiotypical and eschatological in character. Figuratively speaking, the Church is a virgin in her maternal role of bringing forth and nourishing the adopted brothers and sisters of Christ through her ministry of the word and the sacraments.²⁵ And so another dimension of Mary's virginity reveals her in her role as archetype of the Pilgrim Church. Finally, being in a special way the model for those who embrace the vow of virginity, of religious chastity or the promise of priestly celibacy, Mary inspires them to bear witness to the ultimate meaning of salvation history in the eschaton or celestial Church where there is no state of marriage.²⁶

Let us note here that Mary's virginity is not a dogma of our faith by reason of a solemn definition of the extraordinary magisterium (*de fide definita*) but as a result of the constant witness of the ordinary magisterium and the *sensus fidelium* with-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 28, a. 1 c.

²⁵ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶ *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, A Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary, NCCB, (Washington, D.C., 1973) 46, n. 124.

in the living Tradition of the Church.²⁷ It is, therefore, one instance where a revealed truth within the 'hierarchy of truths' can be endowed with a rich meaning for Christ and His Church without being solemnized by the Pope or an ecumenical council. We have merely suggested very schematically some of that spiritual wealth which, of course, has been further developed as in the extension of her virginal motherhood to include all the redeemed on account of her complete self-giving to God for the sake of his kingdom.²⁸

Before examining in greater detail the more recent Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption which have been solemnly defined, let us consider their foundation in the virginal "Theotokos." Here we have especially much to learn from the Eastern Churches in whose tradition the "Theotokos" has always been the central Marian mystery. As René Laurentin remarks:

The best representatives of this tradition never seem to lose sight of the fact that Mary's virginity, conception in holiness, and assumption, as well as her present relationship with mankind are precisely the virginity, sanctity, conception and assumption of the Theotokos, or in other words, a particularly privileged illustration of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. However, let us not exaggerate. I am not arguing here for a mistrust of formulae, or for an impoverishment of concepts. . . . Nevertheless, do let us see these formulae, always, in their most essential, most theological, most Christological light, the light that shines in the word, *Theotokos*. In this we contemplate the most sublime heights of Mary's glory, and, at the same time, the sign and human reality by means of which God actually entered into our tragic story to make of it a history of salvation. In this mystery of the *Theotokos* we see, finally, the relationship, all of grace and love, which God contracted

²⁷ F. M. Jelly, *Mary's Virginity in the Symbols and Councils*, in *Marian Studies* 21 (1970) 89-92.

²⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York, 1964) 80-86.

with the holiest, the most receptive, and the most cooperative of all the redeemed.²⁹

The words of the renowned mariologist state well the need for a certain hierarchy within the Marian dogmas, with the Theotokos as central, if we are to grasp the place of the Marian dogmas within the hierarchy of all revealed truths.³⁰ Eric Mascall asserts that all else about her in salvation history flows from the function of her divine maternity which makes her unique in the whole human race and yet relates Mary to all as the most perfectly redeemed. "And therefore the whole purpose in the mind of God, from the moment in which He called Israel to be His people and indeed far beyond that in His eternal counsels, was that in Israel there should be a woman from whom God the Son could take human nature and who could become His mother. It is not therefore fantastic to suggest that Mary is, in a particular way, the type of the people of God, the Virgin Daughter of Israel."³¹ Once again we see that the eclesiotypical dimension of the Marian dogmas is intimately connected with and dependent upon the Christocentric dimension especially in her divine maternity.

When Karl Rahner begins to show how the defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception can be made understandable in the context of the totality of revelation, he immediately observes: "Mary is intelligible only in terms of Christ . . . It may indeed be said that a sense of Marian dogma is an indication of whether Christological dogma is being taken really seriously . . ."³² In anticipation of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths' he wrote down his reflections on this dogma as a truth that grew out of the totality of the Christian understanding of faith. And

²⁹ R. Laurentin, *The Question of Mary* (New York, 1965) 143.

³⁰ Cf. D. Dietz, *Hierarchy of Marian Truths* (to be published in *Marian Studies*, 1976).

³¹ E. Mascall, *op. cit.*, 135.

³² K. Rahner, *The Immaculate Conception*, in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore, 1961) 202.

in that totality Rahner concentrates upon the central mystery of Redemption. As the immaculately conceived, Mary is the most perfectly redeemed. In her is the clearest revelation of her Son's saving grace since in Mary it was always victorious. Of all the redeemed she alone was predestined with Christ since, as His mother, she was intimately involved in the saving event of the Incarnation. Her consent to be His mother at the annunciation was completely free and truly cooperative not only in her own redemption but that of all humanity. The fact that she was filled with the triune God's favor made her consent no less free. For grace makes possible the very freedom of the good act.

In her experience grace was completely uninhibited. Her loving faith and obedience was totally responsive to God's revealing word. Truly she was blessed because she heard God's word and kept it (cf. *Lk.* 11:28); and she was able to be completely open to God's plan of salvation because He who is mighty so highly favored her and accomplished such great things in her (cf. *Lk.* 1:28 and 49). The saving event of the redemptive Incarnation found its fullest expression in her by whom God's "yes" of merciful love was received so generously. In Mary we find only grace. There is no guilt in her. The real power of redeeming love is made manifest in Mary. Through her the triune God reveals to us the undivided personality, the one who concretely shows that through the redemptive Incarnation of her Son grace has an absolute pre-eminence over guilt even in our sinful world.³³ There is a profound sense in which her unique privilege of the immaculate conception makes Mary more one with us as redeemed persons. It witnesses to the truth that we are born into a world that is graced with the new creation of Christ even prior to our Baptism—our own being immaculately conceived in Him.

Although Mary was perfectly redeemed from the beginning

³³ K. Rahner, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in Our Spiritual Life*, in *Theological Investigations* 3 (Baltimore, 1967) 140.

by the grace of her immaculate conception, she came to receive the fullness of the redemption only with her glorious assumption. In faith, however, we behold one as the *normal* finalization of the other. We might even say that her immaculate conception was her assumption *originative* and her glorious assumption is her immaculate conception *terminative*—somewhat as we speak of grace in reference to the beatific vision as *semen gloriae*. Again Rahner sees this defined dogma of the assumption as “only really intelligible in the totality of the one saving Truth.”³⁴ He relates the dogma “essentially and immediately” with two articles of the creed: the virgin birth and the resurrection of the Lord. This, of course, is its inherent Christocentric dimension.

Almost at once, however, we can contemplate its ecclesiological significance since the birth of Christ through Mary was an eschatological event in that it was the definitive act of rendering the world into an irrevocably redeemed state. His resurrection resulted *normally* after dying on the cross because He is the Redeemer who initiated this eschatological event in the world. It is indeed fitting that Mary, the ideal representation of complete redemption who took such an intimate and necessary part in that event, be glorified in the totality of her human being. For us in the pilgrim Church who believe in the dogma of Mary’s glorious assumption, the central mystery of our faith in the redemption takes on the added meaning that one of us redeemed—at least one of us—is already glorified. A promise already fulfilled even in just a single human person is a tremendous motive of our hope in the Lord. In fact, faith in the dogma of the assumption helps preserve our belief in the reality of the humanity of the risen Jesus. The American Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Mary makes reference to this in the context of the need for devotion to her and all the saints in glory.³⁵

³⁴ K. Rahner, *The Interpretation of the Dogma of the Assumption*, in *Theological Investigations*, 1, *op. cit.*, 216.

³⁵ *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, *op. cit.*, 32, n. 85.

ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS OF VIEWING THE MARIAN DOGMAS WITHIN THE 'HIERARCHY'

At this point it should be clear that to emphasize the Christocentric and ecclesiotypical character of the Marian dogmas is not only of considerable theological value for the faith-understanding of Roman Catholics, but must also be of some ecumenical significance. Focusing our attention upon their intimate relationship to the central mystery of our Christian faith certainly helps meet the traditional Protestant and Anglican objection that we have put Mary into competition with Christ as our one Redeemer and Mediator. For far from competing, the truths about her in salvation and revelation history truly serve to give greater intelligibility and spiritual value to our faith in Christ and redemption. Also the 'hierarchy of truths' approach to the mystery of Mary makes us take more seriously the primacy of the biblical revelation in understanding any truths of our faith. Particularly with reference to the more recent Marian dogmas have we been remiss in establishing the scriptural basis for our belief. This has alienated even our separated brethren among the Eastern Orthodox Churches who have traditionally sustained their deep devotion to Mary.

In the final section of this paper, I wish to explore the possibilities of an organic unity of faith without requiring adherence to the two Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption, at least in the sense in which they have been interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church. As I stated at the outset of my presentation, the occasion for such an inquiry is Father Avery Dulles' proposal that the Church remove the anathemas which have been attached to these two defined dogmas. My intent here is not to discuss the juridical act of lifting them. This would seem both possible and desirable: possible because the Church does not have to anathematize in order to preserve unity of faith; desirable both for the sake of a clearer atmosphere of freedom in believing the Church's dogmas and for its ecumenical significance as intended by Father Dulles. But

we must be concerned with the consequences of his proposal. For in his address, Father Dulles is proposing much more than a juridical formality—as meaningful an ecumenical gesture as it might be—when he says: “It needs to be made clear once again, as it was in the first few centuries of the Christian era, that full ecclesiastical communion among professing Christians is the normal condition, and that communion is not to be ruptured except for very serious deviations that call into question the basic message of the gospel. It is inexcusable for the churches to be mutually divided by doctrines that are obscure and remote from the heart of the Christian faith.”³⁶

As a member of ARC (the Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue in our country), I identify very strongly with Fr. Dulles’ deep desire for Christian unity and also have been laboring long in the cause of sifting out what is and what is not essential for our oneness in Christ as an ecclesiastical communion. In light of this paper, however, I cannot say that the Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption are “doctrines that are obscure and remote from the heart of the Christian faith.” It seems that the ‘hierarchy of truths’ teaching can have a double effect ecumenically: one, definitely positive, in making our beliefs more intelligible to our separated brethren in light of the “foundation of our faith” which we share; the other, apparently negative, when a peripheral dogma assumes a new importance in the ‘hierarchy’ precisely because it may be necessary for the proper understanding of the central mystery. Then, it seems to me, that we must be careful “not to throw out the baby with the bath.” And so we may have the responsibility of discreetly asking our separated brethren why such and such a Roman Catholic dogma is unacceptable to their faith in case the reason does touch upon the central mystery or “foundation of our faith.” For instance, Rahner remarks in speaking about the assumption:

³⁶ A. Dulles, *art. cit.*, 420.

Perhaps the deepest reason why Protestantism rejects the new dogma is because really it is only aware of a theology of the Cross as a formula for reality here and now, and not a theology of glory; for Protestantism this is ultimately only a promise, and not something which exists 'even now', although it has not become apparent. But for anyone who believes that counter to all appearances the forces of the world to come have already seized hold of this world, and that these forces do not consist merely in a promise, remaining beyond every sort of creaturely existence, for a future still unreal; for such a one the 'new' dogma is really nothing more than a clarification, throwing light on a state of salvation already in existence, in which he has always believed. That this state of salvation should be attributed to Mary in its entirety and fullness will not seem an impossibility to someone who knows that this salvation was born of her in virtue of the consent of her faith and in consequence has had its most perfect effect in her. The 'new' dogma has significance not only for Mariology but also for ecclesiology and general eschatology.³⁷

Let me remind you that, for the most part, I am speaking very tentatively in this section with the hope that greater light will be thrown on the problem during the discussion especially by Father Dulles. For instance, it does *seem* that Rahner's point about the Protestant reason for not accepting the dogmatic teaching on Mary's assumption does touch upon something central to our faith and so essential to organic unity.

Worthy of some special consideration is the approach toward a plurality of interpretations taken by Fr. E. J. Yarnold, S.J. in a University Sermon which he delivered at Oxford, March 7, 1971. Before getting into his proposal, he makes some telling preliminary remarks:

I am convinced that it should not be a matter of indifference to a Roman Catholic how his beliefs on the subject of Mary will strike other Christians. Loose thinking about a hierarchy of doctrines may

³⁷ K. Rahner, *The Interpretation of the Dogma of the Assumption*, *op. cit.*, 226-227.

encourage him to feel that the doctrines connected with Mary are of the second rank and therefore need be no obstacle to reunion. It is surely closer to the truth to say that there can be no such thing as an inessential article of faith, meaning by that term an article of faith about inessential areas of Christian belief. All articles of faith must be about Christ, about the way he saves, the way he reveals the Father and the way he sends the Spirit to his Church. The onus is upon Roman Catholics to show how articles of faith about Mary cast light upon the essential Christian beliefs about Christ. They can be Christian dogmas only insofar as they do this.³⁸

Fr. Yarnold's theory about the possibility of more than one interpretation of a dogma within the one communion is based upon his belief that ordinarily there are two levels in every doctrine, a symbolic level and a theological level. He calls the historical or quasi-historical formulation of the doctrine its symbolic meaning, whereas the theological is the deeper meaning expressed through the symbolic and which concerns directly Christ and the Redemption. He believes that it is compatible with organic unity to have some members interpret the symbolic formulation literally while others are true to the one faith by accepting only the theological meaning. For him the theological level of the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption signifies:

that it is of faith that God's grace requires human cooperation, provides the conditions which make the human response possible and fruitful, and results in sanctification, so that the holiness of the church will be verifiable in the lives of its members, and will overflow from member to member; and finally that all that is truly of value in human existence continues after death, when it is transformed in heaven.³⁹

I find Father Yarnold's theory fascinating and even courageous,

³⁸ E. J. Yarnold, *Marian Dogmas and Reunion*, in *The Month* (London, June, 1971) 177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

if not daring. The concept is good logistically, but the way he applies it to the two Marian dogmas appears to be reductionist. I believe that the special effects of Christ's redeeming grace must have really happened in Mary; otherwise, the doctrines involved seem to be mere abstractions. Obviously, I am not speaking about a naïve or simplistic interpretation of symbolic faith-language in which the *via negativa* does not adequately preserve the mystery. But, as mysterious as is Mary's redemption (as well as ours), a real affirmation about the redeeming grace of Christ must also affirm something properly (literally and analogically) about her.

John Macquarrie, in a chapter about Mariology from his recent book on ecumenical questions, comes closer in my opinion to a more realistic theological interpretation of the dogmatic content of the immaculate conception. He preserves both the Christocentric and ecclesiotypical dimensions of the dogma in describing Mary's receptive type of righteousness. At the same time he does speak of the immaculate conception in terms of a real unique grace in Mary:

So what is negatively described as Mary's preservation from original sin means in an affirmative way her enjoyment of the divine grace. The moment had come when alienation was at an end, when mankind had been brought to the condition of being *capax Dei*, capable of receiving God on the gift of the Incarnation.

Perhaps it needs to be added that in all this we are thinking of Mary not as a private individual with a private biography (though she was that) but as a public figure, in the sense that we are interested in her as a moment in the story of humanity or, better expressed, a moment in the history of God's dealing with humanity. Mary is part of a corporate history, and also part of salvation history. She is on the one hand in solidarity with Israel, and brings that history to its culmination. On the other hand, she is the first member of the new Israel, the Christian church, and already prefigures it. She is that point in humanity at which incarnation could take place. . . . Though they may express themselves differently, many who are not

Roman Catholics recognize the truth in the words: 'Blessed be her immaculate conception!'⁴⁰

In light of this last statement, I should like to conclude my paper with the brief comment that the validity of expressing ourselves differently about the same dogma of faith can be of great value not only ecumenically but also theologically. For a plurality of forms regarding the one revealed truth among members of the same Christian church reflects the inexhaustible quality of divine mystery. Several good modes or forms of expressing the revelation—when each is faithful to God's word and its development in the Tradition—should bring out more clearly the many facets of the mystery in order to enrich our lives of Christian contemplation and ministry. Since Vatican II's teaching on the "hierarchy" of truth, one of the main criteria for the authenticity and spiritual value of doctrinal interpretation must be its transparency to the central mystery of our faith—the triune redeeming God revealed in Jesus Christ.

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⁴⁰ J. Macquarrie, *Christian Unity & Christian Diversity* (Philadelphia, 1975) pp. 94-96.